Writing Waves

Volume 3 Article 13

May 2021

Root Rot

Melody Shelter
CSU-Monterey Bay

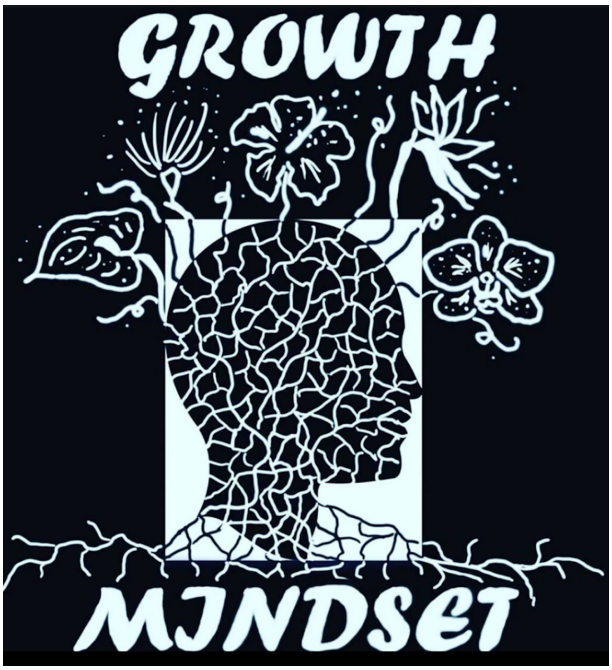

Figure 1: *GROW* by Alison Thomas

Root Rot

Melody Shelter

Keywords: Family, Family secrets, Heritage, Family Traditions

---

My family has always been especially talented with their hands. My aunts paint and sketch, my uncle works with car motors, my great aunt and uncle used to cook, and my grandmother does just about every handicraft imaginable to the human mind. My secret theory is that it comes from the hours kneading eggs, flour, and

water into the pasta that tastes like home. It's a family experience, beginning at such a young age that I don't even remember when I started learning to press great mounds of dough into flat circles for ravioli. I think about this as I pass an aged photo into my father's well-practiced hands. I sit at his feet on the carpet as he handles the yellowing paper gingerly. It's a comical reflection of when he would read the board book version of *Strega Nona* [Figure 1] from Barnes and Noble while I sat on ground in front of him.

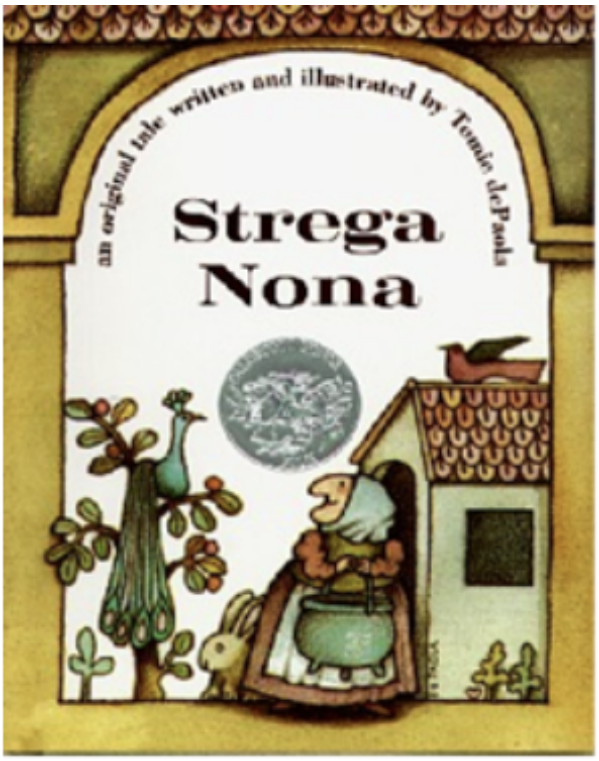

Figure 2: Strega Nona

The picture is of my father, smiling the same smile that greets me every day, as a twelve-year-old boy [Figure 2]. He's hugging his Uncle George with his younger sister, Christina. I have not seen Aunt Christina as happy as she looks in that photo in a very long time. Although, I have not seen Aunt Christina in a very long time.

My father tells me the picture is probably from a family gathering of some sort, the kind his grandmother, Grandma Hoke, insisted upon every holiday and every Sunday. His eyes alight, he tells me

Figure 3: Left to right: Christina, George, Jason (father)

about the cooking that would start at noon and continue into the night. Spaghetti marinara, ravioli, gnocchi, meatballs, and cannoli all filling the air with tantalizing scents.

Little "scooches" [1] scamper between the adults, sneaking the olives and cheeses that are strictly "for the guests." Older relatives doze on the couches in the living room after the overly large meal, while the cousins and some younger, more hip aunts and uncles pick up a game of soccer. I nod along as he describes the scene, but I already know it well. Of course, I do. It was my childhood too. Change out the soccer for red light, green light, and Nintendo video games, and it's a near-perfect match. We Italians do enjoy our traditions.

My father goes on to tell me about how much life my great grandmother had. Vicenzena Hoke née De Raimo was from Rockaway Beach, New York, though her surname roughly means "of Rome." According to family legend, when Salvatore, her father, came to America via Ellis Island and enlisted to fight for the American army in World War I, there was a transcription error on the documents. The original family name was "Di Raimo," the proper Italian spelling of the word. The roots in Lazzio became shallower as soon as Salvatore De Raimo set foot on American soil.

The De Raimo/Hoke family stayed in the Rockaways because

[1] Scooch (noun): a mischievous child.

of the community there. Everyone was extremely close-knit and protective of one and another. One time, my father tells me, Uncle George and a few of his friends got fed up with a new man in the neighborhood. He was "causing problems," though if my father knows what those problems were, he refuses to tell. Either way, George and his buddies found the man's car and proceeded to push it into the harbor. I exclaim my disbelief at this behavior, but my father waves it away. The police officers that worked in that area were all members of the neighborhood, so George got off with a warning and a probable whooping from Grandpa Hoke. It sounds like gang activity to me, and I say as much, but I am dismissed again. It borders on gang activity, yes, he says, but it's just protecting our own. He says "our own" like it still means something. Like the very idea of a cohesive family is still in the cards.

Rockaway, though idyllic through the tales of my father's mother, Uncle George, and their sister Betty [Figure 3], has seen its share of tragedy. During World War II, machine guns lined the coast there out of fear of Nazi invasion. Though the submarines never came, Fort Tilden still remains, the gun emplacements there like a scar. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 devastated the community beyond the expectations of anyone. A large percentage of the neighborhood had moved closer to the city to work at the World Trade Center. Nearly as many of the adults there are firefighters or cops. The casualties were seemingly limitless. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and everyone in between—taken by senseless violence. When the Towers fell, so did the hearts of Rockaway Beach. Everyone is connected not just by the nearly homogenous ethnic origins of Ireland and Italy, or the religious roots in Catholicism, but the fact that the community's love for each other is unshakable, it's "for the good of the many" attitude, as articulated by E. J. Dionne for The Washington Post (Dionne).

When Rockaway Beach was washed away by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Betty was shattered. She spent an inordinate amount of time scrolling through pictures of the town in shambles. She stared in mute horror at the images of debris and wreckage washed onto the beach she would go to with friends. I had a deep sympathy for a problem I had no power to fix. I had always felt an inexplicable connection to her as my great aunt. I used to think that it was the fact that she took on Grandma Hoke's role of keeping the Italian

Figure 4: Betty Hoke at her Confirmation

traditions alive in the new generations. Now I know there was more. Now I know Betty took more than one of Vincenzena's roles.

As one of my favorite relatives, I felt her pain acutely, though I didn't understand it. I had never been to Rockaway, and I still haven't. How could I have known that Betty was mourning the place she still considered home?

When she was just fifteen years old, Betty was shipped off from her haven in New York to live with her older sister, my paternal grandmother, in Bellflower, California. Bellflower was not the safest of cities. Much of the daily news there centered around robberies and violent altercations. Home must have been a truly dangerous situation that was being hidden away. Betty never spoke of it. My father later was told that it had something to do with his Grandpa Hoke's alcoholism, the existence of this disease unbeknownst to my father the whole time Truman Hoke was living. Maybe it was just Truman's drinking that led to Vincenzena sending their teenage daughter to live 3,000 miles away to sleep on a pullout sofa-bed in her sister's living room. Maybe, but I am not convinced. There is probably more underneath the superficial truths. Conflict, money, crime. I don't know. I expect there are more secrets that I may

never know. One has to make peace with that fact in this family.

Betty hated California at first. The plastic, shallow people she met were shocking to the girl who grew up in the "communitarian" neighborhood (Dionne). I cannot disagree entirely with her. Growing up under the influence of Hollywood is a harmful drug, especially for a developing mind. However, according to my father, who lived under the same roof as her during that time, she found her stride in friendships she made at Lakewood High School. Yet, she still grieved the place she was forced to leave behind. I understand why, though I didn't always. She was grieving the symbolic more than the literal—Betty was always sentimental like that. The relics of her childhood among those who accepted each other and stuck together no matter what were under several feet of murky water. It was a reckoning for her, I imagine, that our family had left that quality in Rockaway.

Our family has always clung tight to tradition. This is evident in the way my father grew up, and in the way my childhood parallels him. We used to have linguini with broccoli rabe and fried shrimp at my Grammy's house every Christmas Eve. We'd have ravioli and lasagna on holidays, and Sundays we would gather at Betty's house for spaghetti when we could. There, we would eat until we were sick. My cousins and I would lay flat on our backs to compare our stomach sizes. I did not grow up Catholic only because my father broke tradition when he refused to be Confirmed in the faith. This was only allowed because Vincenzena had already passed. Aunt Betty was extremely superstitious, an Italian immigrant tradition in itself. She would gasp in horror at someone stepping on a crack in the sidewalk, or placing a hat on the bed. All of this in addition, of course, to our most presently held tradition. The secrets.

I often joke that I have genetically inherited Catholic guilt, but sometimes I wonder if there's truth to it. I wonder if traditions are in our blood. The town from which Vincenzena's parents hailed is the tiny, but ancient village of Sezze, in the Lazzio province of Italy. In Sezze, townspeople reenact the crucifixion of Christ and the story of Good Friday every Easter. They have done this since the 17th Century, play-torturing actors dressed as Hebrew slaves, costuming as Pontius Pilate and the Virgin Mary as they march through the ancient roads. The gory procession makes its way through the winding streets, spilling fake blood and crying in agony in place of their

Savior. Unfortunately, pageants of violence, even those of the Passion, can and often do result in real injury. The New York Times reports that a few of the players were disciplined for accidentally whipping spectators in their enthusiasm (Stanley). Even the oldest of traditions can go sour. Some have always been poisonous.

The unfortunate tradition of secrecy is not exclusive to the De Raimo strain, though. Italian Americans are raised on a steady diet of ravioli and silence. For an example of this, look to a piece for MELUS that states, "For the earliest exponents of Italian American writing, their italianitá ["Italian-ness"] was far more than a mere sign of cultural otherness. Insofar as a core value of this mostly Southern italianitá was a profound distrust of anyone outside the restrictive family unit, the sharing of personal information in a public forum was frowned upon, even if it was in the service of the creation of a literary self" (Insana 2-3). This resulted in a lack of true Italian American literature in the centuries of immigrants keeping their silence for their families. Truth was for the clan to know. It has been in our blood for centuries, secrecy has. It's not our fault.

Vincenzena Hoke, affectionately known as Zinzy, stopped going by her very obviously Italian name when she moved away from Rockaway. She went by Nancy instead. Italian immigrants were not the most popular people in the midst of World War II. It was not her fault. She wanted to protect her family from the harmful stereotypes. Still, she snapped at anyone who called her Zinzy after that, my father recalls. She also kept her husband's secrets for the good of the family. The alcoholism, and the ones she took with her to the grave.

Betty Pierce née Hoke was saddled with chronic illness from even before I was born, and in the last few years of her life, cancer. There were months where she would be bed-ridden with flesh-eating bacteria and rheumatism. I had no idea. I only learned of her health struggles upon her diagnosis with cancer when I was twelve. My mother remarked that her fight would be more difficult than most because of her medical history. Only then did I learn of the constant pain my great aunt was in when she played "noodles" with me on the floor, a game we invented together where we would pretend to be Strega Nona with her magic pasta pot, mixing up board game pieces in a tin. She was hiding it from me. For me.

Even when Aunt Betty was fairly certain she was going to die of

her disease, she did not tell most of the family. She asked my sisters and I not to visit her while she was going through the process of chemotherapy—a last resort she chose. I was only fourteen, and newly in high school. I didn't know much about death, nor do I still really know, but what I do know is this: I would have wanted more time to truly know this woman, especially as she faced death, her mortality. I know she was scared. She wasn't that good at hiding. No one is.

At the time, I thought she was feeling unwell and didn't want to have to entertain visitors. I was told after her death that she just didn't want us to see her gaunt and balding from the poison pumping through her veins. The only time I did see her during her battle with cancer was when she was undergoing radiation treatment or was in between treatments. The last images I have of her are with pale, but supple skin and tufts of curly hair growing back around her ears. I know she would have wanted it that way, but I cannot help but feel a little guilty for not knowing the true pain she went through. Yet another person hiding to protect her family. Even more secrets.

Even after she died, Betty left the instructions to not have a funeral in her memory. She hated for people to be sad on her account. She was protecting us from beyond the grave. I admire her selflessness more than I can describe.

Though I admittedly find myself feeling frustrated at the lack of transparency in the family, I am not innocent of lies of omission. I must remind myself of this fact, remind myself that I understand how it feels to have the weight of your entire family dynamic on your shoulders. I must remind myself that I know what it's like to be the Atlas, to be responsible for keeping the skies from crashing down. For years, I hid who I truly was to protect my family. I lied about who I was, how I felt, how I loved. I thought that keeping that information inside me for life would be the only way I could keep from breaking down my family from the inside out. Here I was, a queer, mentally ill, Italian American. I was no longer part of "our own." We weren't in Rockaway anymore. We had to stick together and be as one, and to do that, we had to act like one. I watched my older cousin come out of the closet when he was eighteen and it nearly tore the family apart. My grandmother denounced him as a sinful being. He was no longer invited to family events. Aunts

and uncles took sides. It was chaos, all because of one hiccup in the plan.

When I realized that my feelings for my female classmate with the flowing blonde hair, the girl I so desperately wanted to notice me, were more than platonic, I fretted for the things that I knew I would lose if I gave any inkling of my attraction. I wanted to keep the gatherings that I saw as if reflected in the rosy glow of my Grammy's copper pasta pots. I wanted the warm and bright Christmas Eve dinners. I wanted the VHS tapes playing crackly Disney movies in my cousins' guest bedroom while we played Mario Kart. I wanted the laughter-filled dining rooms and heaping piles of pasta. I wanted those traditions for my future children. I wanted that kind of love. I also wanted to scream, "Where is your Rockaway?" Little did I know, I was participating in the longest-held tradition in holding my tongue. Though excruciating, that was a kind of love too.

Eventually, though, my father's genes reigned victorious. He has been a rebel since his childhood. He flipped off the dean of students in the high school parking lot, before speeding out to skip class. He told the priest outright that he did not believe in his faith, and that he was refusing Confirmation, against his mother's wishes. He picked on his siblings but fought with ferocity when anyone else dared to say a word against them. He was, and is, defiance incarnate. Blood will out, as they say. I started letting people know who I really was the same year Betty died. I never got to tell her. It is a shame, really. I feel her support would have been the most important for me. I do believe she would have supported me. Betty was the most Rockaway of the whole clan. And she, of all people, understood the moral reason in hiding.

The reactions to my queerness were not what I expected. I was met with unflinching support from Betty's children and my immediate family. We hold our own family gatherings now, though less traditional without the ruckus the whole clan creates when we are in one place. The messy cooking is the same though. My Grammy was closer to expectations, though not nearly as dramatic as her first go around. She says is praying for my healing, healing of what I do not know. Being comfortable in my identity for once? Being in love? Finding my other half? I do not know. Now she lives half-way across the country. She does not have the same leverage from a distance. My other aunts and uncles still do not know, to

my knowledge. I guess I never truly forgot my roots. I hope Aunt Betty is proud.

The more I investigate my family history, the more holes arise. There are gaps in the timeline, erratic movements across the map. My father experienced the same dilemma when he began research on our family tree. It feels a little like Big Anthony doesn't know how to stop the magic pasta pot from boiling over and filling the village. The differences? I have empty spaces instead of spaghetti, and Strega Nona will not be coming to blow her three kisses to stop the pot.

It seems ironic that Strega Nona was such a lynch pin in my cultural upbringing. I was told that it was an ancient Italian fable. Ancient, yes, but Strega Nona was inspired by an old Russian tale, not Italian. The character of Strega Nona, "witch grandma" in Italian, was largely invented by author Tomie dePaola in 1975 (Insana 6). Even the metaphors for the lies are lies.

This fact does not make it any less valuable as a piece of Italian American literature, though. dePaolo never pretended that he created the folktale in its entirety. Italian Americans just assumed it as their own (Insana 6). The figure of the witch grandma became part of the cultural identity. The folk magic Strega Nona practices in the stories was given new life. A story that was not Italian became the quintessential Italian American read. This is just as well, though. The narratives we claim often say more about us than the true origins.

Strega Nona ends with Big Anthony being told he must account for his blunder by eating all of the pasta the pot spit out. After doing so, he is left in considerable pain. I fear if I accept the missing information as a lost cause, as Big Anthony consumed his growing mass, I will meet the same fate. Then again, what other choice do I have? It is not in my nature to leave a mystery unsolved but even so, I can appreciate the ironic healing in accepting the unknown. There is meaning behind every question mark.

My father was the first in decades to break tradition. He started with his Confirmation, yes, but he has done more than that. He has done more reading on our family's history that any of us has, combined. He has always divulged what he knows to me, though he only knows so much. He is not omniscient, though I sometimes think he might be (he knows when I'm going to miss my curfew before I

do). Above all, he is sympathetic to my thirst for knowledge.

It may be presumptuous of me, but I like to think I join the two worlds together. I have experience on the side of secrets and of truth. I have held silence carefully and I have shattered it in frustration. The very act of writing any of our history down is a rebellion. It is a leaf out of my father's book. Though I have empathy for those secret-keepers before me, I am happy to take that leaf.

Author Bio

Melody Shelter is a student at CSUMB. This essay was written as part of a first-year composition course.

Artist's Statement

GROW by Alison Thomas

In the digital art series *OCTOPUS GARDEN*, patterns of self discovery and healing are communicated in the works of *BURN*, *FOCUS*, *GROW*, and *SHINE*. Mirroring the anxiety, isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic year they were created in, these pieces share a redirection of energy through burning down of "self" and growing anew. Highlighted are the cycles of self introspection, destruction of ego, pursuit of purpose, and rebirth of spirit found through love.

Works Cited

Dionne, E. J., Jr. "Unshakable Rockaway: [FINAL Edition]." The Washington Post, Nov 13 2001, ProQuest. Web. Accessed 26 Nov 2020.

Insana, Lina. "'Strega Nona's' Ethnic Alchemy: Magic Pasta, Stregheria and That Amazing Disappearing 'N.'" MELUS, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2006, pp. 207–243. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30029669. Accessed 27 Nov 2020.

Stanley, Alessandra. "In this Gladiators' Arena, Even Nero is Bloodless." New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast) ed., Sep 26 2000, ProQuest. Web. Accessed 26 Nov 2020.